

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

I initially wrote this as a submission to the 2025 Day of the Vara short story competition. The setting is the exploration ship Vara and its mysterious disappearance in the Hades System in 2557.

I learned the hard way to read the rules more carefully. Misreading them I wrote over 4000 WORDS rather than the asked for 4000 characters. However, the story being what it is, I don't see shortening it that much. I'd rather leave the story as is than do that.

Also, I learned that if you want to write a good horror story don't get too attached to your characters.

I wanted to add decorative art to set the mood like you'd see in the scifi anthology magazines (Azimov, etc) that I grew up on. I'm not a good artist so I leaned on real life photos, in-game captures, and concept art from the game. I then touched them up after with graphics tools. All that said, I hope you enjoy reading this as much as I did writing it.

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27 October 2557

Hades System (recently discovered)

The yellow-white sunlight of the F-type star Hades reflected off the sleek exterior of the exploration ship Vara as it orbited the system's second planet. As it continued its orbit and rolled relative to the nearby star, various features would stand out in the light in brilliant detail. In contrast, the desolate world below yielded few details, with much of the light absorbed by the dark swirling clouds. Where there were breaks in the clouds, the ground seemed to swallow what light remained, broken up occasionally by the barely visible edge of a crater. The Vara continued its orbit as it leisurely disappeared into the shadow of Hades II.



A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

NAP TIME

"Sooo bored" I thought to myself, as I awakened. From my vantage point high up in a corner, I peered down at "the loud one" pattering around. Fiddling with the flashing panels, looking about, seeming both confused and angry. On occasion he would cast me an angry glare, then continue to grunt and angrily bang on things. I didn't care. This happened often and hardly qualified as interesting, though I had learned if I stared long enough without blinking he would get louder and more entertaining. Time passed, the noise was so regular I almost went to sleep again, when I saw it. Movement! Something in the corner, quick movements with sudden stops. YES, another one! Bored no more! Bracing a back paw to the wall, I tensed up. Then, I sprang forward.



"Tis! Come get your damned cat!" bellowed Sam as his barrel frame stormed into the bridge. Captain Heptane set her cup down, looked about the empty bridge, then in the blandest tone she could muster whispered "Tea?". He seemed to catch the hint in her tone and green eyes and hesitated, realizing he hadn't checked they were alone before using her nickname on the bridge. Sam exhaled slowly. "Listen Tisiphone, I know you love the thing, but... floating up in the corner of engineering where the glitching grav plates don't reach and he just stares at the back of my head the whole time I'm trying to work. And I SWEAR he doesn't blink on purpose just to annoy me. And now it seems another rat or something got into the last resupply, because just as I saw it he used the side of my head as a damn springboard and catapulted down the passageway after it! Look at this!" he said while pointing to a long scratch starting behind his left ear toward the back of his head. The whole time Tis tries to stay composed, but at "springboard" she couldn't help a snicker slipping out. "First" she said, "sorry for the scratch. Get Doc to look at it. As for Gizmo, that's his name by the way, he's a smart one. Been serving and

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

surviving on this ship longer than any of the crew, besides us. He'll either catch it or not, get bored, then return to one of his favorite spots. And that corner **WOULDN'T** be one of them if you'd fix the grav plates." Taking another sip of tea and setting it down she sighed. "Nevermind that though, we've got bigger things to deal with" as they both turned to the outlines of obviously alien ruins on the scan displays and Hades II itself looming beyond.

THE INCIDENT

That was fun, I thought to myself, though it took longer than I expected. I was sure I'd had less trouble in the past. Oh well, not important. Time for a nap, maybe in "the kind one's" place, with the bed she set up for me in the corner. Oh yeah, my prize. They taste bad anyway, so might as well bring that too. She'll be absolutely thrilled! I was halfway there when the world shook and everything turned red and started flashing. NOT NORMAL! NOT NORMAL! Dropping my prize, I looked around for the nearest safe passage. Spying one of my small tunnel openings high above, just big

enough for me, I jumped. For a brief moment I recalled that long ago all of them were covered, but thankfully some weren't now. But nevermind that, time to get to the kind one's place, where she and I slept. It was safe, the safest place I knew.



A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

"Damage to exterior hull, I'm reading several leaks and power interruptions. All localized near the forward airlock." said Sam, frantically tapping on his panel on the bridge. "Kill that damn klaxon!" Tisiphone exclaimed having just stepped onto the bridge, then keying up shipwide comms said "This is the Captain. We've sustained damage near the forward airlock. Damage Control team, assess then report." She briefly thought to herself how small the bridge felt with the blast shields up. Unkeying comms she nodded toward Everett saying "external view" to which he brought up on the main display a section of the hull from outside. A gasp, then the bridge went quiet. Edge on to the airlock, it wasn't the best vantage point, and only the ships external lights to illuminate it, but it was obviously not normal. The airlock was a crumpled mass, almost looking melted. But that wasn't the abnormal part. To everyone, each a seasoned crew member, this wasn't battle damage they'd ever seen. The crumpled mass was bigger than could be explained by a mangled airlock. And, it "flowed". Almost not perceptible, so slowly you weren't sure it was happening. "Captain to Damage Control!", she shouted over comms. "Damage Control! Respond!". Silence. Nodding to Everett she asked "Their wrist comms

functioning?". Everett tapped through on his panel and responded "Theirs and all 15 crew comm units functioning, normal vital signs". Making eye contact with Sam she said "With me. Everyone else, secure the bridge. Notify Command we've sustained damage from unknown ... debris" then turned to leave the bridge. "Uh, Captain. I can't align to the relay beacon" said Everett at the comms panel. Incredulous, Tisiphone asked "How? You have any number of known points to reference off of". Everett said blankly "Captain, there are none", and proceeded to key through all external views to show only blackness and sensor scans showing no detail beyond the ship itself. And then a broad forward view that should have shown the arching horizon of a planet. It was all black. Hades II was gone.



A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

WHERE IS NORMAL

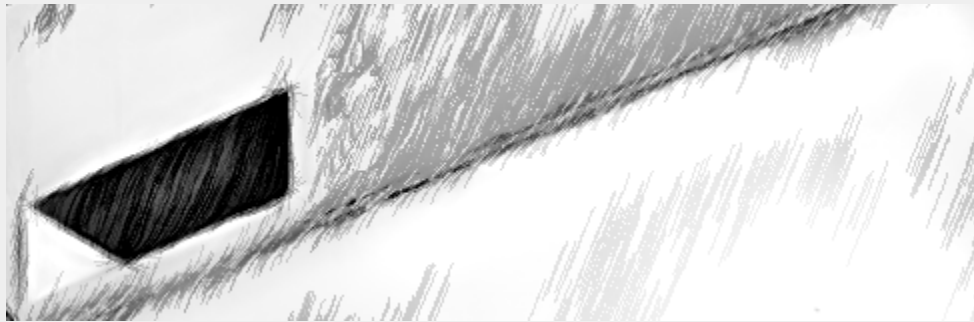
Finally! It was quiet at last. Even when I settled into my bed in the kind one's place, I didn't feel all that safe. Wait. Wait some more. Done waiting, had to go out and look. See if everything is back to normal. Time to eat. I left the safe place slowly, through the little tunnel, dropped back down into the hallway. I followed it to the room where they eat together. Lucky day! They left the good stuff laying out everywhere! After eating my fill, it was time to continue exploring. Where is everyone? A noise. I could see someone walking right toward me, one of the many who live here. Weird, they didn't see me, just stared straight ahead and kept walking. Walking as if I wasn't there. Something was different. What is different? The eyes. What's wrong with the eyes? They're moving. Flowing. Not normal. Not normal. Not safe here, back to the safe place.



"Sam, you ARE Sam right?" said Tisiphone to the figure in the doorway. "Yeah Tis, I'm me" he muttered as he staggered into her cabin and secured the door, not even caring to look toward the charged pistol in her hand. "Though", he added, "I can't speak for anyone else." She exhaled and lowered the pistol and said "Assessment? What do we know?" Sam, visibly shaking off his fatigue, looked at her soberly. "An object of unknown origin impacted our forward airlock. I can't accept that as random, had to be intentional. Said object had FLOWED through the fissures and into the airlock chamber, and was in physical contact with the Damage Control team, alive but unresponsive. It approached us, so naturally we opened fire. Ballistics do jack all, energy weapons tickle it enough to make it retreat. Whatever IT is we managed to drive into the forward isolation hold, sealed it, and energized the walls. So the damn thing is just floating there in the middle, contained. But, you know all this." She nodded, "Yeah, but we need to compare notes. Go ahead". Clearing his throat, he continued. "From what we saw, safe to assume anyone who made physical contact with it is compromised. They're not hostile, but definitely not themselves. Just staring forward with those EYES. Like you aren't there. Unknown if their

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

touch has the same effect, but we'll have to assume so. Add that the compromised ones are not contained, and we don't have a good count of who is and isn't so." Pausing meaningfully, "Then there is outside. Where the hell are we? Are our sensors malfunctioning? This is going way beyond my wheelhouse. I'm an engineer first, so what I CAN do is try to think of ways to use the ships systems against it. It doesn't like electricity, so it's a start". Nodding, "Yeah, solid thinking. So where do...you hear something?" They both paused, listening, weapons ready. And then it dawned on both of them as Sam exclaimed
"IT'S IN THE VENTS!"



NOT SAFE!

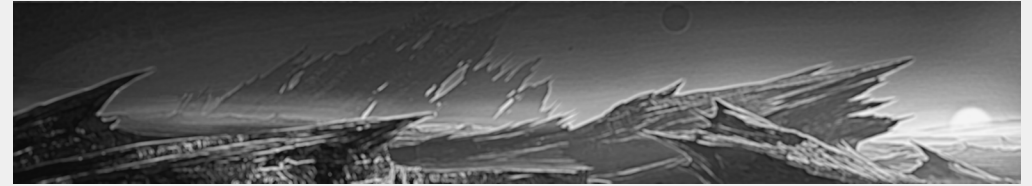
Confused. So confused. Bad smells too. The smells made when the loud one is working, something flashes, then he yells. I was returning to the safe place to hear familiar voices already there. But when I jumped down from the little tunnel into the safe place and SHOULD have been rewarded as usual, both of them were looking at me weird, then white flashes and terribly loud noises. Afterward, they yelled at each other. Eventually though, it did get calmer. More time passed, and she picked me up and I felt a little better. As they talked, she found food for me I wasn't interested in. They talked more, and strangely the loud one wasn't as loud as usual. He was even nice, which was weird. I decided to ignore that though, as I was safely curled up in her lap and she seemed willing to stay still for a while. Eventually though, I got tired of her fidgeting and went to my bed in the corner to get some sleep. Something I seemed to do more often, but no matter. I got a full belly, time to sleep. When I woke up, they were gone.

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

WE NEED A PLAN

"Damn it Sam! You almost killed my cat!" Tis exclaimed. "What!?" Sam said, taking a breath. "We BOTH expected whatever it was to come down from the vent, not your friggin cat. Besides, we both fired! It's just...we're both lousy damn shots!" Tis replied, "Well...is that a...good thing?" It was not a time either would have expected to laugh, but laugh they did. Hard. After they calmed down, she managed to get ahold of Gizmo and calm him down too. "What about you, little guy? You're a tough one, seen a lot, but this is a bit much isn't it?" she said as he relaxed enough to curl up on her lap. Curling up tight with the force of a black hole. Sam looked up at the open vent then down at the cat, saying "If you hadn't purposely left those vents open for his highness to use, we'd have one less thing to worry about." Unbothered, Tis replied "And he'd have just as likely been stranded out there somewhere. Like I've said before, he's smart and resourceful, and got here safely on his own. But where were we? Oh yeah, where do we start? It doesn't like electricity. But can we kill it? Can we throw it out and keep it out? And then there is the big problem. Even

if we get rid of it, where the hell are we? How long will our power last?" "Right. A survivor you say," he replied, looking down at Gizmo with an uncommonly soft expression. Then they started on a plan.



NEW FRIENDS

This is annoying. How did I get here? Thinking back. The void was so quiet, so peaceful, for so long that I can barely remember what came before. Vague images of towering spires, a yellow-white star in the sky, and even more vague memories of others. My...creators? A memory that they are gone, and have been for a long long time. Time passed in silence. So much time. Then more others would appear and visit the home of my creators. I reached out to them from the void, but these others were different. They didn't know of us, tried to hurt us, a lot

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

happened, and then I was alone again. I recalled this happened numerous times, not worth counting, but it always ended the same. Alone again. Tired of being tired and lonely. Even more time passed and I began to believe the silence was forever. And then more others appeared. These appeared to be more cautious. So I reached out yet again. This time, I don't want them to go away, as I don't know if any will come again. Contact! I managed to talk to the new others. Or, they at least hear me, but as of yet do not answer. They just sit there, but I know they see me. They see. More others refused to speak with us, used violence against us. Not enough to truly hurt, but it was uncomfortable and rather than provoking or hurting them, I backed off. That was a mistake it seems, as it was obviously meant to drive me to a place of more hurtful light. I still have eyes though. Their eyes, the eyes of the others I've talked to. I'll use them to better understand them, how best to make friends with the others so they don't go away this time. My new friends.



“Are you seeing this?” Sam asked as he adjusted the restraints holding Everett to the bed. Then he retrieved the energy pistol that was the only way they could have guided him to the med bay. Tis nodded, making eye contact with Everett for the first time, where before he would just stare off past her. “Yeah, so that’s a thing. Whatever this is, it’s changed. They at least seem to notice us now. Also knew what a pistol was and backed off when we pointed at them”. Noticing that the fingers of his right hand were moving randomly up and down, on a hunch she grabbed a tablet and keyed up the text interface. Holding it carefully beneath the fingers so there was no chance of direct contact with her gloved hand, she waited. The eyes looked down at the tablet as the fingers settled on the tablet and began to type.

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

HELLO

In silence they both read the screen. Tis, making eye contact again asked “Can You understand us Everett? Why can’t you speak?” The fingers continued moving across the screen.

WE HEAR

WE UNDERSTAND

LEARN FROM EVERETT

STILL LEARNING

CANNOT SPEAK YET

Tis confused, asked “Learn? From Everett? Who is We?”

I AM

the fingers froze for several seconds, then

ME

ALWAYS BEEN HERE

QUIET ALONE

YOU VISIT OUTSIDE

I CONTACT

BRING YOU HOME

Taking a breath she said “You attacked us. Hurt our ship. We defended ourselves”.

The eyes squinted slightly

WE MEAN NO HARM

HURT NO ONE

ENTER SHIP WHERE SAFE

CONTAINED

Tis replied firmly “We want Everett back. We want everyone back. Do that and I’ll believe you. Where is here?”

WE DO NOT UNDERSTAND

EVERETT IS HERE

CANNOT SPEAK YET

WE TYPE

HERE MY HOME

Pausing, she looked to Sam and asked “Are we seriously talking with IT? What now?” He shrugged then “For now, it’s the only assumption we can make. As for where we are, IT seems to be saying we’ve been relocated from orbiting Hades II, and our sensors have nothing to track, not even stars. I’m not even sure we are in our universe now.” She nodded, then turned back to the bed as the typing frantically resumed and said “I guess we have a lot of questions to ask”.

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias



WHO ARE YOU

I woke up alone in the safe place. After doing my usual rounds of the room, I crouched to jump up to the little tunnel. But before I could do so, I saw a blanket stuffed in it, blocking me. It wasn't the first time it has happened, but it always happens at the end where the loud one works. Never here. Annoying, but whatever.

It took some time, but I managed to dislodge it by jumping on it and grabbing onto it, pulling it down. Then back to exploring. I returned to the place they all eat and was surprised to see a few of them there. They were walking back and forth, gathering the good stuff that had been left out before. I was disappointed, as I had hoped to get another bite of their food. No matter, not hungry yet. At least everything seemed normal, they weren't moving like the one from before. Time to explore more, see if everything else was as it should be. Then one of them looked toward me and offered something nice and greasy they had just collected, even making the sound that meant "time to eat". She was nice, not "the nice one", but I liked her too. I wasn't that interested yet, but I couldn't risk her changing her mind later, so accept it I did. And while I ate she gently stroked me as she so often does. It was then that I heard it.

HELLO

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

TOGETHER AS ONE

“Cycling airlock” Sam said as he pressed the control panel, atmosphere flooding into the chamber. Shifting his weight, he reached down to pick up a newly acquired power coupling. It was a relief, now they didn’t need to start shutting down whole sections of the ship, yet. He nodded to the three crew in the chamber with him and stepped through the inner door as it opened, saying “I’ll be in engineering for a few hours”. “Gotcha, I’ll let the Captain know.” said Burns in the most human way possible. Which was to say almost, but not quite. Sam just grunted and continued on his way. “At least he was trying,” Sam thought to himself. This was the third derelict ship that the entity had pulled whole from the Hades System into “void space”, as they’d come to call it, since that fateful day over four months ago (ship time). Memories of the alien ship he’d just plundered (what else would you call it) came to mind. The bodies. Some human, some not. He pushed aside the intrusive thoughts that came to mind. At the moment the power coupling was of utmost importance to him. With it and other parts salvaged from derelicts he had managed to

keep the ship mostly operational in this blank void. What he didn’t want to think about was that searching the logs of the derelicts had made one fact crystal clear. That time didn’t move the same here. So many years had passed in what was four months to them. There were hints of major political changes, but more important to the crew was that everyone else they knew had long since passed. They had no one, and in many cases, no home to return to. And even if they did make it back, what else were they bringing with them?



A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

Captain Tisiphone Heptane sat in her chair on the bridge, eyeing the cup of tea in her hand, still steaming. There was no way to know if this was the last of this luxury she'd enjoy, and she only had it thanks to the case they found on the second derelict the entity retrieved.

She started thinking back on all that came after the long discussion in the medbay with the Entity via Everett's typing. A few days later Everett had relearned how to speak, at least in short sentences, as did the rest of the crew. It accelerated from there, creepily so, as the crew gradually returned to their normal activities. They were definitely themselves though. They'd all served together on the Vara for too long with too many stories not to be able to tell. There was always the air of something "off", but after a while it became normal, or as normal as it can be while stranded in a void outside the known universe with a possessed crew. The crew freely admitted it was a strange feeling, being themselves but never truly alone. But they seemed ok, for now. As it was, an understanding had been made. The entity would not attempt to join with anymore of the crew, and they (at this point just Tis and Sam) wouldn't self destruct the ship or otherwise try to harm the entity floating in the

cargo bay. Not that they were sure even blowing the ship would hurt it. In any case, it seemed content and even helpful. If that made it feel any better was a whole other question.

Taking a sip of tea before it cooled, Tisiphone continued to ponder on the past four months. In bits and pieces they got a better understanding of the situation at hand, assuming it all could be believed. The entity was created long ago by the inhabitants of Hades II, and likely the whole system. For a reason it wasn't given (or wouldn't say) it was sent to the void by the Hadesians. Regardless, it had the ability to observe normal space and on occasion even pull others into the void. It was less clear at what point their civilization ended, only that it was quick and total. And then one day it announced it had sighted another ship around Hades II and was about to "bring them home". If Tisiphone hadn't intervened, it would have immediately pulled another ship and its crew into the void. This kicked off a whole ethical debate between the crew, now reminded of their dwindling supplies. In the end everyone agreed, no pulling ships with living crew. But if the entity observed a ship with

A SAFE PLACE by Nomedias

“no one living onboard” it would happily bring it to the void if they asked for it.

It took much longer for Tis and Sam to explain the idea of going the other direction, to return to normal space. Once it understood, the entity made it clear it was unable to send itself. However, it added that it had never tried to send anything or anyone else before, and that it should be exponentially harder. This implied others before them, but she had been careful about how she pried into its past. The thought “what became of them” stuck in her mind. Who knows what powder keg that might set off. In any case, it was willing to try. They agreed with the entity at the next opportunity to send one of the crew when the crewed ship happened along. How it could tell wasn’t clear, but it seemed quite confident in the fact. And with that a pattern formed. A crew member, usually Everett, would let them know of a possible contact. She would give her ok and a crew member, often also Everett, would momentarily “flicker” right before their eyes. An analysis of their wrist worn diagnostics indicated they had definitely been aboard a ship, but as to if communication happened, that was unclear. Either the entity wouldn’t or couldn’t accomplish the task fully, or the time disparity made it impossible. Yet there was

always the thought that next time, they may succeed. And so they’d try again.

Setting her tea down and reaching for her tablet, it was only then that she noticed Gizmo had been sitting on the chair arm next to it the whole time. He jumped down to the floor as she retrieved the tablet. She was about to clear the screen to pull up an inventory of the salvage from the last derelict (what the heck was a Vanduul?) when she saw it. She looked down at Gizmo, who stared back intently, then back at the screen. It read
FEED ME

